

Medicinal plants: Past and present uses in several communities from the North-eastern Portugal

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1. Introduction

Medicinal plants, past and present related uses emerged from broader studies conducted during several years inside 36 rural communities in Trás-os-Montes. This region, as other areas in the interior of Portugal, has seen socio-economic transformations since the 1960s that have altered landscape management and plant use.

The surveys aimed to report traditional plant knowledge and uses (TK). In addition focused on the system of local knowledge on plant resources and prevalent traditional plant use and practices.

Ethnographic methodology was used and consented structured enthnobotanical interviews were carried out.

2. Synthesis of main results and conclusions

- TK is mainly found in people from 60 to 80 years old.
- Younger people (below the age of 40) doesn't know the names of plants and can't easily recognise them.
- Older people with different schooling experiences reveal no great differences in their knowledge.
- Gender differences only with regard to some of the uses attributed to plants. Recognition of their use in medicine seems higher in women than men.
- Age, decline of agriculture, substantial changes in local agroecosystems and modernity affect wild plant gathering and consuming and induce new medicinal plant uses and practices.
- Herbal remedies, mainly infusions and decoctions, are still used for pathologies of the digestive tract and respiratory and nervous systems.
- Plants used for skin, reproductive system, muscular skeletal, and children therapeutics are much less used or not used at all.
- Awareness of increased risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes leads to relatively recent plant uses that prevent or heal metabolic syndromes.
- TK on medicinal plants coexists with modern trends in plants knowledge and use, recently introduced in local culture by present-day media, popular books and middle-aged emigrants returning home, for instance.

3. Some examples of past and present use of Medicinal Plants

Plant	Past medicinal use	Present use
 <i>Humulus lupulus</i> Wild and Cultivated hops Lúpulo	Liqueur prepared with female flowers Digestive, stomachache	No longer cultivated Unknown by young Difficult to gather by elders Substituted by fennel (<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>)
 <i>Crataegus monogyna</i> Hawthorn Espinheiro, escaramunheiro	Infusion of flowers Respiratory system Bronchitis, cough Flu preventive Fruits eaten raw Source of vitamins	None Unknown by young Difficult to gather by elders Substituted by elderberry (<i>Sambucus nigra</i>) e.g.
 <i>Origanum virens</i> Oregano Óregão, mangerico do monte	Infusion of flowers Respiratory system Bronchitis	Condiment Unknown by young Substituted by a Fabaceae species (<i>Pterospartum tridentatum</i>) e.g., as it is also anti-hypertensive
 <i>Borago officinalis</i> Borage Borragem	Decoction of leaves Soup Intestinal depurative, post-partum restorative, Dysmenorrhea	Soup is still used by some women as medicinal food, intestinal depurative, for abdominal pains and weight loss
 <i>Umbilicus rupestris</i> Navelwort Baselos, conchelos	Leaves fried in olive oil Ointment Haemorrhoidal	Unknown by young Seldom substituted by mallow (<i>Malva sylvestris</i>) and rockrose (<i>Xolantha tuberosa</i>) decoctions for local bath
 <i>Verbascum thapsus</i> Great mullein Cássimo, cuchapeiros	Topical application of warmed leaves Vulnerary, skin injuries	None Unknown by young
 <i>Olea europaea</i> Olive tree, olive oil Oliveira, azeite	Olive oil used for topical application, ointments, macerations and poultices	Infusion of young leaves Hypertension Cholesterol Triglyceride

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References :

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